

GEOGRAPHICAL RECORD

ENGAGING THE PUBLIC IMAGINATION: GEOGRAPHERS IN THE OP-ED PAGES*

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Numerous publications have recently called on geographers to be more publicly engaged (Murphy 2003, 2006a; Alderman 2004; Murphy and others 2005; K. Mitchell 2006). Other articles have focused on geographical scholarship, public-policy formation, and public geographies (White 1972; Castree 2001, 2005; Martin 2001; Dorling and Shaw 2002; Burgess 2005; Ward 2005, 2006; Pain 2006; Walker 2006). Much of this literature expresses dismay at the seemingly limited ability of geographers to engage with the broader issues of the day. This angst, however, is not confined to geography and reflects a more general concern across the academy about a paucity of public intellectuals (Jacoby 2000; Michael 2000; Small 2002; Ward 2007).¹ The reasons for engagement with the public imagination, and how best to do this, deserve ongoing reflection.

Kevin Ward has developed the notion of “public geographies,” which he sees as distinct from geography for public-policy formation (2006; see also Fuller 2008). Drawing heavily on the work of the sociologist Michael Burawoy (2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b), Ward describes policy-oriented writing as scholarship whose purpose is to provide solutions to predefined problems. In contrast, public scholarship is less about intervention and more about bringing a disciplinary perspective into a broader conversation with the public. Ward, continuing to draw on Burawoy, then describes two distinct forms of public scholarship: organic and traditional (2006). The former is a more involved form of public scholarship, in which one works intensively with an interest-based or area-based group. This type of public scholarship has also been discussed in terms of participatory-action research and participatory geographies—and a number of geographers are involved in this arena (Gibson-Graham 2003; Monk, Manning, and Denman 2003; D. Mitchell 2004; Pain 2004). The second form, described as “traditional,” occurs when the scholar “acts as an intellectual to instigate debates, through the dissemination of research or the writing of articles or columns in popular magazines or newspapers” (Ward 2006, 499).

In this essay I explore “traditional” public geography in terms of geographers’ engagement with the public imagination via op-ed pages. More specifically, I hope to answer two interrelated questions: why geographers should engage with the public

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